

Dance

Arguably the central feature of all aspects of African American folklore, dance conjoins a rich constellation of physical memory, individual expression, and social presence within African American life. Because it is always intertwined with traditions of music—Harlem Renaissance art critic Alain Locke termed dance “the cradle of Negro music”—dance affirms, for the individual and the group, physical opportunities to express pleasure, pain, desire, and aesthetic excellence. Learned by youngsters as an integral aspect of identity formation and social interaction, dance connects long-standing African traditions of body talking, musicality, and individual expression. Dance also articulates group experiences for African Americans, as each generation produces its own particular musical and dance structures suited to its temperament and the current social climate.

Many folklorists and historians concur that dance and music bring African characteristics and traditions into the New World to a greater degree than other constituent cultural traits. Stylized movement has long been important to African Americans, who transform everyday gestures into choreographed movements, as in the “high five” of basketball players or the complex handshake greetings that end with a snap of the fingers preferred by contemporary youth. This tradition of movement innovation is doubtless African in origin. Anthropologist Katrina Hazzard-Gordon writes that from its beginnings, African American dance “has served its participants as an instrument of aesthetic, intellectual and emotional expansion and enjoyment, as well as a source of self-awareness.” Dance has also served ritual and ceremonial purposes and been thought of by many as a medium that links people and the worlds of the gods.



High school students doing the twist in a baggage car (1962). Like other popular dances of the 1960s, it originated with African American youth and became popular with the mainstream white culture. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

As if to agree with the adage that in African American culture, the act supersedes its discussion, dance has received little scholarly attention, and the literature on its history, theory, and practice remains small.

Reliable documentation of dance events predating the mid-twentieth century is slight. Before the 1800s, slave society strictly regulated public dancing by African Americans. Drum dancing solidified connections among the slaves' varied West African cultures, so to minimize these powerful affinities, slave owners legislated performance and carefully mediated dancing affairs that might provide opportunities "to exchange information and plot insurrections." The dancing body, after slave uprisings such as the South Carolina Stono Insurrection of 1739, was linked with rebellion in the minds of whites. The resultant slave laws of 1740 prohibited any Negro from "beating drums, blowing horns or the like which might on occasion be used to arouse slaves to insurrectionary activity." According to Hazzard-Gordon, public dancing came "under the strict governance and supervision of whites who legitimized violence as a means of controlling the slave population." Eventually, the most important idioms of African American dancing went underground, and dances that carried significant aesthetic information became disguised or hidden from public view.

The earliest codified and documented dances of slaves combined ritual, play, and communal rebirth within the provisional safety of the Christian church. The **ring shout**—a circle dance of praise that allowed for bits of individual expression—emerged in Georgia, Virginia, and the Carolinas. Although the Protestant church frowned upon rhythmic fiddle music and dance, "marching praise services" were allowed in some congregations in the nineteenth century. As these marching services developed complex rhythmic structures, worshipers developed rules to satisfy the stringent church restrictions: the feet must not leave the floor or cross each other. Technically, this made the ring shout "not a dance." Like later group dances, including the **big apple**, the ring shout encouraged individual expression and innovation such as body patting, slapping, clapping, and stomping within the repeated slide-together-slide movement of the group. The ring shout continued as a central feature of many **black church** denominations and probably led to the rise in liturgical praise dancing of the many latter twentieth-century denominations.

Outside of the slave master and repressive clergy's controlling eye, however, dance flourished among African Americans. Three distinctive solo performance forms emerged in the nineteenth century: buck dances that featured weighted, percussive foot work; wing dances that focused on flapping gestures of the arms and knees; and jig dances that emphasized speed and agility of the body, especially in the legs and feet. All of these plantation-era movement idioms found their way into the **cakewalk**, a partnered competition and parody dance that began among African Americans in the South but grew in popularity to reach an international public. Like nearly every other African American social dance that followed it, the cakewalk became an international sensation practiced and appreciated by dancers around the world. Its basic features involved exaggeration, improvisation by individuals, comic allusion, virtuosity, complex meter, and percussive attack, all features noted a century later by African American art historian **Robert Farris Thompson** in his seminal research article "Dance and Culture: An Aesthetic of the Cool."

The cakewalk began as a social ritual of competitive play and parody but became a theatrical form inseparable from the **minstrel** show, which was a nineteenth-century phenomenon initially performed by men in blackface aping the plantation manners and **festival** dances of southern slaves. The minstrel show solidified around 1840 and remained popular until the turn of the century. Its preferred format featured competitive and eccentric dances, boastful struts and cakewalks, and freakishly stylized characters, including stock types **Zip Coon** and **Jim Crow** as well as African American dancer **William Henry Lane**'s stage persona, Master **Juba**. The cakewalk's ascendancy on Broadway set in motion the undeniable importance of African American social dances and music for all of American popular entertainment.

Dance as an aspect of religious worship flourished in the Caribbean, where African traditions melded in the syncretic practices of **Santeria**, **Candomblé**, and **Vodou**. Fused primarily from spiritual practices of the enslaved Yoruban people, which included divination knowledge of natural forces and a relationship to the ancestral realms, these religions value dance as a foundational form of worship. Here, dancing and **drumming** explicitly serve to enhance the spiritual well-being of African Americans in traditions that include dances of ritual, **possession**, and transcendence.

Even under **slavery**, African Americans convened frequently to celebrate and share movements, compete in dance challenges, and consecrate a common artistic heritage of dance. In **New Orleans, Congo Square** became the site of a large festival dance that convened regularly from the early 1800s until at least

the 1880s. Here, African drumming accompanied dances practiced by the many Caribbean immigrants, including the chicha, the bamboula, and the calenda. At Congo Square, and contemporaneously at competitions in the Five Points district of New York City, intense competitions pitted dancers against each other in challenges of style, agility, and innovation.

At the turn of the twentieth century, amid increasing northern **migration** and industrialization, individual expression became more possible for African Americans, and social dances reflected the hard-won expansion of personal freedoms. By the 1920s, New York, and especially Harlem, became a mecca for a cohesive black community, and “eccentric dances” accompanied the emergent **jazz**. These dances, including the **black bottom** and the **Charleston**, featured extravagant body-part isolations, especially in sinewy or sudden motions of the pelvis and spine and in rolling of the torso, shoulders, elbows, and knees in unexpected, continuous waves or accented, rhythmic jerking. The snakehips dance, popularized by impressive performances of Earl “Snake Hips” Tucker, a soloist with the Duke Ellington Orchestra, emphasized successional movements clearly derived from religious dances retained by black Americans in the Caribbean, including the movements of Damballa, a snake deity of the Vodoun. While some found these dances to be sexually explicit, others recognized them to be African American versions of African fertility, kinship, and possession dances.

After the cakewalk declined, the Charleston and its affiliated eccentric dances took center stage in Broadway musicals, and a cycle began in which social dances emerged in regional locations, traveled to New York where they were further refined, were transmitted to the New York stage where they became the toast of the town, and then were performed abroad to international acclaim. The Savoy Ballroom in Harlem allowed dancers the space to codify a great many social dances that gained international currency, including the **lindy hop**, the Harlem stomp, the big apple, peckin’, and versions of dances from the South, including the **turkey trot** and the bunny hug.

Broadway also codified folk forms of rhythmic dance that became known as **tap dance**. Developed among the social crucible of dance competitions among African, Irish, and British immigrants in downtown New York, tap emerged as a distinctive form in the 1910s. It was a **hybrid** of African American buck-and-wing dances, English clog dances, and Irish jigs. Outstanding African American tap artists including **Bill “Bojangles” Robinson**, the “class act” team of Honi Coles and Cholly Atkins, and the expertly virtuosic Nicholas Brothers achieved fame and acclaim for their mastery and advancement of the idiom on stage and **film**, as did latter-day artists Sammy Davis Jr., Dianne Walker, Gregory Hines, and Savion Glover.

African American dancers who aspired to the concert stage also achieved success by transforming black social dances into theatrical fare. While ballet and modern dance remained the realm of white dancers in the 1930s and 1940s, some black artists managed to break the “color line” by creating dance programs that featured African American artists in works with African American themes. In New York, Edna Guy and Hemsley Winfield organized the “First Negro Dance Recital in America” in April 1931; years later, Guy organized the 1937 “Negro Dance Evening” with Alison Burroughs at the Ninety-second Street YM-YWHA. Sierra Leonean émigré Asadata Dafora created opera-styled dance-dramas with African themes in *Kykunkor* (1934) and *Zunguru* (1938), works that employed African and African American musicians and dancers to great theatrical effect. During this era, some prominent white choreographers also turned to African American themes in works set to Negro spirituals or Caribbean religious rituals, placing African American folklore at center stage.

Two African American women gained unequivocal celebrity status as pioneers of African American modes of concert dance performance. **Katherine Dunham** and Pearl Primus each surrounded her artistic innovations with graduate work in **anthropology**, a strategy that ensured attention respectful of the effort to catalog deep structures of African American performance. Dunham achieved her greatest performing success within the commercial arenas of Broadway and Hollywood. She based much of her stage choreography on her research in Afro-Caribbean traditions and developed a dance technique from aesthetic features of African movement retentions that were visible in the Americas. In 1931 Dunham founded the Negro Dance Group in Chicago, and after traveling extensively in the West Indies, she choreographed one of her most famous works, *L’Ag’Ya* (1938), which was based on a fighting dance of Martinique. She made

Haitia principal site of her research before moving to East Saint Louis in 1967, where she created a museum and center for dance and culture.

Primus understood dances to be compelling documents of culture in their own right and synthesized extensive fieldwork in **Africa** to create structures of bodily memory—cultural memories residing not just in the psyche but deeply embedded in the physical body. In her essay “Primitive African Dance (and Its Influence on the Churches of the South),” which was written for the 1949 *Dance Encyclopedia*, Primus argued an aesthetic connection between African American dance practice and African musicality; she also pointed out the absence of audience in the African and African American traditions where call and response requires that everyone participate in the dance. Her choreography of African and African American themes included solo dances that expressed rage at racial indignity, as in *Strange Fruit* (1945), and introduced African rituals to American audiences, as in *Fanga* (1949).

Other dance companies incorporated elements of African American life in their stage choreographies, with special success achieved by Alvin Ailey, whose *Revelations* (1960) depicted a spectrum of black spiritual practice. Also, Louis Johnson’s ballet *Forces of Rhythm* (1972) was created for ballet dancer Arthur Mitchell’s company, Dance Theatre of Harlem, to depict the synthesis of ballet and black social dance, and Talley Beatty’s *The Stack Up* (1983) melded theatrical jazz dance, ballet, modern dance technique, and contemporary social dance. At the close of the twentieth century, Jawolle Willa Jo Zollar’s *Batty Moves* (1995), Donald Byrd’s *Harlem Nutcracker* (1996), and Ronald K. Brown’s *Grace* (1999) each reconfigured the theatrical possibilities of African American social dance for contemporary opera house stages.

The place of dance as a political strategy shifted when civil rights activism in the 1950s and 1960s precipitated a neo-African movement that valued African dance forms that had been transformed for African American dancers and audiences. “African dance” classes sprang up first at cultural centers across the country and later in college dance curricula. Following the lead set by Pearl Primus, Baba Chuck Davis, from Raleigh, North Carolina, founded the African American Dance Ensemble in 1968, and spearheaded an annual festival event, Dance Africa, that includes music making, food and crafts sales, dance workshops and performances, and ceremonies for elders in the dance community. Simultaneous with the rise of neo-African forms, **stepping** emerged with vigorous followings first in college **fraternities** and **sororities** and later in community centers and youth programs, where it was designed to engage concepts of physical discipline, aesthetic expression, and group cooperation. Step routines are part of an entertainment ritual that includes chanting, singing, speaking, dancing, and a synchronized group dynamic that promotes solidarity and cooperation.

Dance studios helped professionalize social dances by standardizing them, and dance schools often serve as important sites for community gatherings. The affiliated schools of the Philadelphia Dance Company, Lula Washington Dance in Los Angeles, Denver’s Cleo Parker Robinson Dance School, the Dallas Black Dance Academy, and Jeraldynne’s School of Dance, which is affiliated with the Dayton Contemporary Dance Company, all number among the many professional dance academies that have deeply influenced social life for African Americans through dance study. On the social front, discotheques, which became popular in cities during the 1960s, pushed a range of African American social dances into the mainstream, including the **mashed potato**, the frug, the swim, the skate, the watusi, and the **twist**.

Although dances are typically learned body-to-body, by imitation and repetition, technologies of mass distribution, and especially musical recordings and television programs, have quickened the movement of African American social dances from local communities to an international populace. The rise of **hip hop** and its affiliated movement components, “b-boying,” “b-girling,” and **break dancing**, signaled a return to dance as metaphorical communication. Rife with intimations of taunting and boasting, b-boying became a competitive strain that inspired the 2005 television show *Dance 360*, in which dancers compete through highly personal styles with virtuosity, surprise, charismatic presence, and coolness, helping the audience to determine the winner. Dances of the 1980s and 1990s often made reference to technology and to consumer culture, and include the bump, the freak, the rock, the robot, the cabbage patch, the running man, the roger rabbit, and the butt. Now, as never before, African American social dances are transmitted to a mass populace with decreased reference to the social contexts in which they are invented. Dance remains central

to African American life, even as its deeper implications of religious, aesthetic, and holistic meaning often go unremarked.

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Thomas F. DeFrantz

Big Apple (Dance)

This African American group social **dance** was briefly popular in the late 1930s. Related to the **ring shout** and the **cakewalk** in form, the dance begins with couples marching in a counterclockwise circular formation. A caller directs steps to the dancers, and at times, allows couples to enter the center of the circle to "shine," or demonstrate spontaneous virtuosic movements.

The big apple derived its name from the Big Apple Night Club located on Park Street in Columbia, South Carolina, where it first gained popularity. The dance spread across the country when it became the centerpiece of traveling stage shows featuring teenage dancers. By 1937, the dance reached the Savoy Ballroom in New York, where its format solidified further to include comic, eccentric steps from earlier dances, including a modified version of the **charleston**; the Suzy-Q, in which dancers traveled sideways while twisting their feet with one foot on the toe and the other on the heel; the "spank the baby," in which dancers fanned their bottoms with one hand as if scolding an errant child; the peck, in which dancers facing each other thrust their necks forward, imitating the pecking motion of chickens; the shorty George, in which dancers slinked from side to side with their arms pointing downward at the sides of their bodies; and truckin,' an exaggerated walking style in which dancers traveled around the circle with one admonitory finger raised upward.

Black choreographer Frankie Manning staged performance versions of the dance at the Savoy that emphasized both its playful and its virtuosic possibilities. White songwriter and big bandleader Tommy Dorsey penned "The Big Apple" in 1937, and the song quickly became a number-one hit. The dance also became a commodity, as it was disseminated by teachers at the Arthur Murray dance studios. By the spring of 1938, the big apple achieved its maximum visibility as a cottage industry of sorts, producing distinctive fashions sold in department stores, special-event dance parties at nightclubs, and a widely reported big apple event in Washington, DC, at the White House. Whitey's Lindy Hoppers, a troupe of professional dances, performed the big apple in the 1939 film *Keep Punching*. The dance faded quickly from the national scene. Filmmaker Mura Dehn documented versions of the big apple in her 1950 film *The Spirit Moves*.

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Thomas F. DeFrantz

Break Dancing

Originated by teenage African American males in the South Bronx of New York City, circa 1970, break dancing began as an expressive response to emergent **hip-hop** music. First known as “b-boying,” breaking quickly became a ritualized form of youth **gang** fighting, one that mixed physically demanding movements that exploited the daredevil prowess of their performers with stylized punching and kicking movements directed at an opponent. Clearly related to *capoeira*, the Brazilian form of martial-arts dance, breaking developed as the movement aspect of **rap** music when break dancers—B-boys—filled the musical breaks between records mixed by disc jockeys at parties and discotheques. Break dancing emerged as part of a young urban culture built upon innovations in language, hip-hop music, fashion (e.g., unlaced sneakers, hooded sweatshirts, nylon windbreakers), and visual arts (e.g., **graffiti**).

Practicing in a circle, like the *roda* of capoeira, break dancing groups, or “crews,” met on street corners, in subway stations, or on the dance floors in nightclubs to battle other groups, with virtuosity, style, and wit determining the winner. Peppered by elaborate spins, balances, flips, contortions, and freezes, the dance required extreme agility and coordination by its young practitioners. Real physical danger surrounded movements, including the “windmill,” in which dancers spun on the ground supported only by the shoulders, or the “suicide,” in which an erect dancer threw himself forward to land flat on his back. The competitive roots of break dancing as a sport encouraged these sensational movements and others, such as multiple spins while balanced on the head, back, or one hand.

Break dancing quickly evolved into distinct movement idioms that included “breaking” (acrobatic flips and spins with support by the head, arms, or shoulders as point of balance), “uprock” (fighting movements directed at an opponent), “webbo” (extravagant footwork that connected breaking movements), and “electric boogie” (robot-like movements). The electric boogie style, reminiscent of a long tradition of eccentric African American dances, developed in Los Angeles concurrent with electronically produced disco music. In this style, dancers appeared to be weightless and rubber-limbed, to execute baffling floating walks and precise body isolations, and to pantomime robotic sequences. This form included the “moonwalk,” popularized on national television by Michael Jackson, in which the dancer’s feet appeared to be floating across the floor without touching it. Other boogie moves included the “wave,” in which the body simulates an electric current passing through it, and “poplocking,” a series of tightly contained staccato movements separated by freezes. An “Egyptian” style, which imitated popular conceptions of ancient wall paintings, was briefly popular in the 1980s.

Among break dancing’s many movement innovations, the “freeze,” common to both breaking and boogie styles, provided posed punctuation to the dancer’s brief display and suggested the body as capable of unlikely physical transformation. Although break dancers typically danced one at a time, the performance of group movements, such as a balance and spin on a partner, became popular as competitive breaking evolved. Although less well-documented, young women, or “b-girls,” began breaking almost concurrently with men and participated in dance battles in New York and Los Angeles.

In a typical uprock battle, dancers connected pantomime sequences of movement that acted as mockery and signified on an opponent’s shortcomings with kicking, jabbing, and punching gestures toward the rival’s face. The battlers never touched. Distinctive break dancing tied personal style to eloquence of motion and presented overlapping levels of movement as metaphor. Break dancing became widely recognized by cultural anthropologists when the New York City Breakers performed at the Kennedy Center Honors ceremony for prominent African American dancer and anthropologist Katherine Dunham in 1983.

Break dancing found a mainstream audience through several films that cashed in on its sensational aspects while minimizing its competitive format. Charlie Ahearn's *Wild Style* (1982), the first film to document emergent hip-hop culture, was eclipsed by a thirty-second breaking sequence in *Flashdance* (1983) that pushed the form to international attention. Other break-dancing films included *Breakin'* (1984), which starred Shabba Doo (Adolfo Quinones), an important break-dance choreographer from Chicago; and Harry Belafonte's *Beat Street* (1984), which featured the New York City Breakers. Break dancing dropped out of the public limelight in the late 1980s only to reemerge as a social dance form practiced by teenagers in nightclubs across the country in the 1990s. By the 2000s, formalized break dancing competitions, sponsored by corporate entities, occurred as annual events in many international arenas.

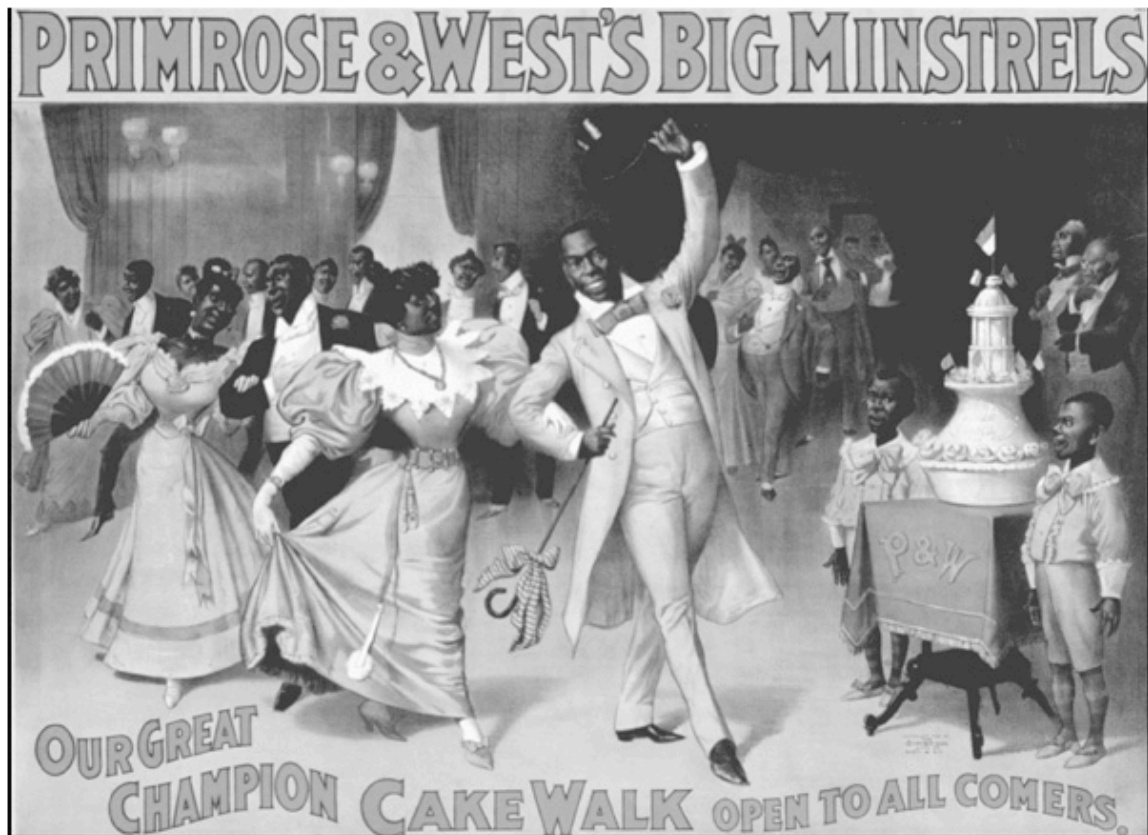
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Thomas F. DeFrantz

Cakewalk

This is a partnered African American social and performance **dance**, derived from dances of corn-husking festivals of the earliest part of the nineteenth century. The cakewalk developed from several sources, including "line walking," a competitive practice in which contestants walked in single file with buckets of water balanced on their heads. This contest evolved into a dance that mixed an exaggerated parody of the ballroom dances of the "Big House" (the slave master's house) with flamboyant, virtuosic strutting patterns and acrobatics. The cakewalk emerged as a sly parody of the quadrille, a French-derived set dance popular among slaveholders in the South. African American dancers made fun of the genteel manners of the quadrille and adapted its erect posture and precision patterns to include complex rhythmic walking steps and sequences of bowing low, waving canes, tipping hats, and a fast-paced, high-kicking grand promenade. As the form of the dance contest hardened, winning couples—those determined to possess the most precision, grace and ease, and the highest kicks—won a highly decorated cake. Thus, "walking for the cake" became the cakewalk. Other phrases inspired by the dance include "that takes the cake" or the idea of something that should be easily done, as in "a piece of cake."



Cakewalk dances became highly popular in minstrel shows, as shown in this Primrose & West's Big Minstrels poster, ca. 1896, reading, "Our great champion cake walk open to all comers." Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

After the Civil War, the dance became a popular portion of the minstrel show, a distinctive American theatrical form performed in blackface makeup. Among the crowded field of mostly white minstrel performers, the highly successful African American team of Williams and Walker (Egbert Austin Williams and George Walker) became the most famous practitioners of the dance. The duo met in San Francisco in 1893 and quickly developed an act with Walker as a fast-talking, citified hustler and straight man to Williams' slow-witted, woeful country bumbler. During a successful run at Koster and Bial's famed New York theater, they added a sensational cakewalk dance finale to their act. Walker performed exceptionally graceful and complex dance variations, while Williams clowned through an inept parody of Walker's steps. The duo hired dancer Aida Reed Overton (who later become a noteworthy dancer and choreographer in her own right) as Walker's cakewalk partner in 1897, and she soon became his wife. Their act brought the cakewalk to the height of its international popularity; they subsequently toured the eastern seaboard and performed for a week at the Empire Theatre in London in April of 1897 as well as in a command performance at Buckingham Palace. In 1898, Will Marion Cook and Scott Dunbar authored the successful Broadway play "Clorindy, or the Origin of the Cakewalk" inspired by Williams and Walker's act. Amazingly, as white Americans witnessed the cakewalk, they failed to recognize their own quadrille as its source and thought it to be a spontaneous invention of the slaves. By the 1890s, the cakewalk spawned popular dance competitions as both a ballroom form and as a specialty dance replete with high kicks and acrobatics. Undeniably important then and now, its struts and exaggerations became the foundational movement vocabulary of Broadway musical "jazz dance." The cakewalk's unprecedented popularity set the pattern for an unbroken series of African American dances that became the source of international attention.

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Thomas F. DeFrantz

Lindy Hop (Dance)

This partnered social **dance** popular among urban African Americans in the 1920s and 1930s was created in New York City in tandem with big band **jazz** music, particularly the fast swing music in duple meter that developed in the mid-1920s. The dance was characterized by intricate, fast footwork and careful coordination of partnering in both closed (partners near to each other) and open (partners separated to solo) dance positions. As first an everyday dance and later a “showcase” form featured in semiprofessional competitions, the lindy hop offered enormous potential for movement innovation among couples. Set foot patterns emerged for its basic steps, derived from earlier solo social dances including the **Charleston** as well as flashier “shine steps,” and acrobatic “air steps” that later came to characterize the dance. In this latter category, one partner would toss the other into the air during open-position “breakaway” sections allowing the dancers to perform spectacular jumping flourishes.

The lindy hop clearly related to earlier black social dances, including the turn-of-the-century “Texas tommy,” but differed in its close relation to swing music for the intricate rhythm footwork patterns that its partners pursued. “Shorty George” Snowden, a celebrated dancer, has been credited with naming the dance after the aviator Charles “Lindy” Lindberg made the first solo flights across the Atlantic. Snowden formed a professional lindy hop troupe, the Shorty Snowden Dancers, to some success in the 1930s. Other expert dancers drawn from the youthful clientele of the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem included Frankie Manning and Norma Miller, who became members of Herbert “Whitey” White’s Lindy Hoppers, a renowned troupe that performed on international tours and in the movies *A Day at the Races* (1937) and *Hellzapoppin* (1941). Manning, who became a professional choreographer, has been credited with creating the spectacular air steps in the mid-1930s for professional dance exhibitions.

The dance gained international popularity during World War II, when it became known as the “jitterbug” by white and international dancers, who often slowed down the basic pulse and simplified complex rhythms. The dance lost popularity in the 1950s, only to be revived in the 1990s as part of a “swing dance” craze that persisted into the 2000s, and it remains prominent in international arenas and on television commercials.



Harlem's Savoy Ballroom in New York was a popular spot for the lindy hop. AP/Wide World Photos.

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Thomas F. DeFrantz

Mashed potato (dance)

The mashed potato was a solo social **dance** originated by african americans in the late 1950s and popularized in mainstream american social dance forums in the early 1960s. Clearly derived from motions of the **charleston**, the dance involved grinding the feet, alternately, into the floor while twisting the hips and flapping the arms. Dancers for the most part remained in one place while dancing, although through movement variations they could turn, hop, bounce or slide in response to partners. The dance derived its name from the foot action, which suggested the grinding motion required to mash potatoes. Footwork from the dance emerged again in the late 1980s in the era of **hip hop** as part of the popular social dance "kid 'n play," named after the musical group that popularized the dance.

The dance is one of the earliest of african american social dance forms to be created in collaboration with mainstream media. While the dance emerged in response to the burgeoning rock and roll music scene, recording artist dee dee sharp's 1962 top ten hit, "mashed potato time," spawned an immediate national

interest in the dance, followed quickly by international media attention. As the dance became a popular international craze, the world quickly neglected its roots as an african american folk dance.

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Thomas F. DeFrantz

Turkey Trot

The turkey trot was a partnered African American social **dance**, probably created in California at the end of the nineteenth century. The dance became widely practiced around the turn of the twentieth century, as the movement component of **ragtime** music. Danced in close proximity, with partners face to face, it featured a basic hopping step on each beat of the music. Essentially a modified ballroom dance, its dancers rocked back and forth while traveling in a large circle around the dance space. Flapping the arms, like a turkey, added the distinctive movement that gave the dance its name. Dancers also stylized the dance by adding trotting steps, foot-flicking **gestures**, and abrupt freezes between phrases. As in other “eccentric” dances, which featured individualized movements, the turkey trot encouraged invention. In a “breakaway” section, the couple separated, and each dancer explored his or her own rhythmic ideas before returning to partner formation.

The turkey trot gained mainstream American attention when it was featured in the Broadway musical revue *Over the River* in 1912. It became an international dance fad and gained even more notoriety when Pope Pius X referred to its movements in a speech condemning improprieties of modern life. By 1913, the dance had been banned in “polite society” for its so-called lewd and uncivilized, bent-kneed hopping and pecking gestures. The dance, which directly preceded the **Charleston**, inspired a spate of “animal” dances including the grizzly bear and the kangaroo hop, in which dancers incorporated flapping arms, pecking heads, and hopping like bunnies.

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Thomas F. DeFrantz

Twist

The twist is a social **dance** that was originated by African American youth and became an international dance fad in the early 1960s. Based on movements similar to those of earlier dances, including the mess around and ballin’ the jack of the 1910s, the dance elaborated on the improvisatory, “breakaway” section of partnered forms including the **Charleston** and the **lindy hop**. In its basic movement, dancers swiveled their hips by twisting both their feet as if putting out a cigarette on the floor, while bobbing up and down and leaning forward and back. Performed individually, the twist became the first mainstream non-contact partner dance.

The twist also numbers among the first African American dance forms significantly influenced by technologies of mass distribution. The dance first attracted national attention when Hank Ballard and the Midnighters, who recorded the song “The Twist” in 1958, performed it in Baltimore, Maryland. Black youth gave the dance form, and white youth quickly copied its contents on the Philadelphia-based television program *American Bandstand*. In 1959, Cameo-Parkway records hired Chubby Checker to re-

record the song in a family-friendly version, and this sanitized recording debuted on August 6, 1960, on the nationally televised *Dick Clark Show*. The song became a top-seller and inspired a merchandising industry that included innumerable sequel songs, low-budget **films**, and fashion items. As the dance gained international popularity in regions as distant as China and Russia, many considered its hip movements “provocative,” and it was banned by authorities in Cairo and Damascus. The twist founded a rock-and-roll dance culture that led directly to the establishment of the first discotheques in New York City.

Further Reading:

Dawson, Jim, 1995, *The Twist: The Story of the Song and Dance That Changed the World* (Boston, MA: Faber and Faber).

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